

Four Year Plan, Becomes 31-Year Career

Press Release

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Like so many people who enlist in the military, Kevin Estrem was going to do his four years and get out.

One of only two in his high school graduating class to join the military, the 18 year-old left his hometown of about 1,500 people Oct. 25, 1972, for Air Force Basic Military Training.

"Four years max and I'm home," thought the Kenyon, Minn., native. "I told my girlfriend I didn't want any commitments. I just want to go in and have this over with and then I'll come home."

The first of many changes to these plans came June 5, 1973, when he and his hometown girlfriend, Debbie, were married. The biggest change, however, was that instead of the young man telling the Air Force goodbye after only four years, the service had to tell Chief Master Sgt. Kevin Estrem it was time to retire after more than 31 years of service.

"I always knew when it stopped being fun it was time to get out, but it never stopped being fun so I didn't want to get out," explained Estrem, whose final assignment was serving as the command chief master sergeant for North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command.

And he didn't go down without a fight.

Having reached 30 years of service in October 2002, the chief agreed to stay on beyond the maximum high-year tenure and served an additional 15 months on extensions.

There may not have been a Chief Estrem, or even a Staff Sgt. Estrem, had it not been for the crucial advice of his first supervisor, Staff Sgt. Randy Butler.

"He told me, 'Don't ever tell your supervisor or commander that you are getting out. You could be the best at what you do, but because they know you are getting out they're not going to waste (the good reports, awards, etc.) on you,'" he recalled. "So, I zipped my lips and I did the job to the best of my ability all the time."

While it was common for people to retire in the 70s as a staff and technical sergeants after 20 years of service, Estrem didn't consider this an option, so he buckled down and studied hard.

It paid off. Now, a 12-year master sergeant, Estrem was intrigued with the possibility of reaching the Air Force's



Chief Master Sgt. Kevin Estrem and his wife, Debbie, are congratulated by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Gerald Murray at Estrem's retirement ceremony Oct. 30. Photo credit: TSgt. Lawrence Holmes

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highest enlisted rank. Estrem looked to the Air Force's senior enlisted member, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Jim Binnicker, for advice.

"I asked him, 'How do I get to be you,'" Estrem recalled. Over breakfast the next morning Binnicker provided Estrem a blueprint for making chief and "he mentored me much of the way."

Soon thereafter, Binnicker reaffirmed Estrem.

"He sent me one of his stripes framed with the words 'You have what it takes to one day wear this stripe,'" he said. "I've always kept that stripe on the back of my door — not many people saw it, but it was my inspiration to be a chief."

Estrem said becoming the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force was never a goal; he just wanted to be a "caring chief that focused on taking care of the enlisted force and mentoring both the enlisted and officer corps to the best of my ability."

After more than 16 years in vehicle operations, then Senior Master Sgt. Estrem got his first taste of shaping tomorrow's leaders as the 4th Group Sergeant Major at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

"That was kind of the starting blocks for me," he said. "I realized how much I liked mentoring the cadets — teaching them how the Air Force works."

Pinning on chief Dec. 1, 1990, Estrem didn't give a second thought to getting out after 20 years.

"Debbie and I were still having a great time in the Air Force and I wanted to be an SEA (senior enlisted adviser) — the representative for all enlisted issues and concerns, a mentor, and a link in the chain of communication between the enlisted force and the commander and senior staff," he explained.

Estrem was selected for his first SEA position in June 1993. He spent his last 10 years in uniform serving as the SEA/command chief master sergeant, for three wings, one Numbered Air Force, two major commands, two unified commands and one bi-national command. At Peterson alone, he served as the top enlisted position at Air Force Space Command, U.S. Space Command, NORAD and USNORTHCOM.

"I focused on doing whatever I could to take care of the enlisted force in any way possible and to make things better for the future of our great military forces," he said. "I tried to make the right decisions, fight for things that could be changed, and improve programs, policies, and procedures that affected the majority of people in the most positive way."

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While he has many accomplishments to be proud of during his 31-year career, the First Term Airman's Center (FTAC) is his prized accomplishment.

Estrem recalled the less than desirable accounts of his first duty station arrival: "It was unbelievable how I was treated and everyone was being treated that way." He showed up to his first duty section only to find out nobody knew he was coming and nobody really cared.

Estrem and three first sergeants vowed to fix the problem.

"FTAC's goal for first termers is to make sure that Airman Snuffy's needs to in-process and get paid are taken care of so when they report to their first duty section all their required appointments are completed and they are ready to start (on-the-job training)," Estrem said.

"The old system was setting airmen up to fail," he explained. "Not knowing where to turn, airmen were asking the barracks lawyers for advice." In many instances, they got into the wrong crowd, got in trouble, and too many times resulted in letters of reprimand and Article 15 actions. But thanks to FTAC, the disciplinary actions dropped dramatically, and the Airmen learned teamwork and networking, Estrem said.

After 31 years Estrem still feels he has more to give. He will remain in Colorado Springs where he hopes to land a job in the homeland defense, homeland security, or space related arenas. He also plans to remain active in volunteer work to include working with the military affairs committee, the Colorado Springs Area Chiefs Group, the Air Force Association and the Pikes Peak or Bust Rodeo.

Unlike many retirees he has no immediate desires to travel.

After literally traveling around the world the past 31 years, which included being away from home almost 200 days a year the past 11 years, Estrem is ready to spend his days close to home.

"I'm going to golf more, ski more and travel less," he said.

These are Estrem's plans today, but based on his past, things just might change.